





# Virtuosity

## *The Art and Craft of a Master Violinmaker*

*“SINGING HAS ALWAYS SEEMED TO ME THE MOST PERFECT MEANS OF EXPRESSION. AND AFTER SINGING, I THINK THE VIOLIN.”*

—Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986)

Aficionados of the violin’s unique voice can tease out its acoustic layers as a connoisseur appreciates the subtle flavors of fine wine. They speak of a certain sweetness or huskiness to the tone, or the balance between bright and dark sound. So close to the human voice is the sound of the violin that the finest ears, as remarkable as it sounds, claim to discern the accents of the original makers in the stroke of the bow over the strings.

The violin—a one-of-a-kind blend of wood, air, wind, and water. Its form is born in the wood, carefully selected and air-dried for at least five years. Its underbelly is cut, carved, turned, gouged, and joined with scores of handheld tools, many whose origins date back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Varnish—applied in a layer as thin as a human hair, stirred and blended by each maker—protects, fills, and seals the wood for the generations. All but a few metal parts and the violin’s four strings are made on the violinmaker’s workbench.



David Chrapkiewicz, master violinmaker.

BY JOANNE MCCOY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE MORGAN

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David Chrapkiewicz uses a gouge to carve the top of a violin from two joined pieces of German spruce.

In his Washington Grove basement studio, David Chrapkiewicz, maker of Rapkiewian fine violins and violas, spends his days crafting fine instruments in the tradition of the grand masters. Hanging above his workbench are violin forms he has modeled on instruments made by Amati, Stradiveri, and Guarini del Gesu. For violas—the violin's slightly larger, lower-voiced cousin—he uses a form of his own design.

Brilliance in the arts was a hallmark of the Renaissance, when violin-making first flourished in a small, northern Italian city called Cremona. Humble and self-effacing, Chrapkiewicz might cringe to be called a Renaissance man. Yet in many ways he has the eclectic passions and broad-based knowledge so

typical of the violinmakers of that golden age.

A musician himself, David is renowned for his excellent ear and keen understanding of how the violin is played. Originally bound for medical school, he was one of the highest-ranked students at Detroit's magnet high school for gifted science and math students. Always interested in the arts, he met his wife, Carolyn, while performing in a Hungarian dance troupe.

David's gifts in art, math, music, and science come together in what has become his life's work—the art and craft of violin-making. Inspired by his grandfather—whom he describes as a "believer" in music rather than a player or a maker—David made his first violin in 1969. He pursued violin-making as a

hobby until the mid 1970s, when he began studying seriously with two French makers in Montreal. Unlike many of his counterparts, David never attended a formal school, opting instead for long hours in the studio at the elbow of Alois Vogl or Raymond Forget.

Some years later, he learned the art of antiquing—the process of making a new instrument look old—from internationally-known, retired violinmaker William Moennig II. Even though the old master was on his way out of life at the time—or perhaps because he was—he spent many hours teaching the young maker the fine art of simulating age in a new violin.

"William had a violin shop inside the Blair School of Music in Nashville," recalls David. "We were introduced by a

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mutual acquaintance and, after a somewhat rocky beginning, we became great friends. He showed me how to scratch, gouge, and distress an instrument and how to shade it in places to simulate use and wear."

"What I've learned since," he laughs, "is that violinists do a fine job of this naturally—and rather quickly. I take care of every instrument I make for life,

so I see it quite often, even after it has been chosen by a player as his or her own. I used to get upset when it would come back to me nicked and gouged, but I've learned to accept that process now...as long as the instrument is being cared for properly otherwise."

Violin tops, says David, are made of strong, light spruce, quartered so the grain runs vertically. The ribs, back, and

neck are usually maple. David favors silver maple, which he calls one of the world's great tone woods, for the very reason many makers avoid it. He calls the characteristic pock-marking of the heavy, hard wood "beauty marks," working them naturally into the body of the violin's two-piece back.

"Whatever wood the maker chooses, it must always be air dried," he stresses.





"Kiln drying is fine for furniture, but it disrupts the wood's cellular structure. Because we carve so deeply into the wood, and the wood becomes so thin, we need the cell structure intact to assure enough strength."

Although he typically works in classical fashion, he has also indulged in grand experiments with various tonewoods over the years. He's carved several violins from Hawaiian kola, a wood he calls "flamboyant and musical, with an endgrain like mahogany." Another bold foray into alternate tonewoods included a beautiful piece of an even more unusual tree.

"When I lived in Iowa," he recounts, "a friend of mine had a collection of beautifully-carved wooden figurines. I ran my hand over one, and it sounded such a clear, crystalline tone. Turns out it was Osage orange, an indigenous tree

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used by Native Americans for making hunting bows because of its strength and resiliency. For some reason, I decided to someday make a violin out of a piece of it.”

Years later, says David, his friend delivered to him a 70-pound block of air-dried wood, and he set about carving a violin body—his first, last, and only from Osage orange.

“That wood was so heavy and dense,” he laughs. “My tools got dull in a matter of minutes, and bits of my knife broke off so frequently that the instrument literally shimmers in certain lights.”

Today, that violin is a treasured possession of David Davidson, a Nashville recording artist and studio musician whose CD, *Celtic Fantasy* (Green Hill 2000), mentions Rapkievian violins in the credits. They can also be heard on hundreds of other recordings, including several by the Indigo Girls and the Fletcher Bright String Band; the Atlanta, Richmond, and Cleveland Symphonies; and the Nashville Chamber and Washington Opera Orchestras.

David has exhibited instruments at various viola congresses and violin conferences as well as at the Celebration of American Excellence exhibitions in New

York City. His violins have taken top honors in all three international competitions in which he has entered, including the Silver Medal for Tone at the Violin Society of America’s International Competition in 2002.

As for his future plans, David hopes to continue in the footsteps of the legendary Stradiveri, who never retired from his beloved work. A consummate craftsman, he plans to continue making violins and violas—each as unique as a snowflake or a fingerprint—the way the world’s greatest instruments have always been made: one at a time.



## *Birth of a Violin*

Master violinmaker David Chrapkiewicz typically makes only three violins per year. Writer Joanne McCoy and photographer Mike Morgan were fortunate enough to visit his studio during the creation of his second instrument this year. Morgan captured the painstaking process in this series of rare images.



A violin's front plate must be thin enough to resonate but strong enough to support significant tension.



The exterior arch of the violin is carved using gouges, planes, and scrapers.



The edge of the plate is reinforced by inlaying an ornamental border or edging, called purfling.



Violinmakers traditionally use maple for the instrument's back, ribs, and neck and spruce for the "belly."



The origins of the stringed instrument's scroll are found in classical architecture, namely the Spirals of Vignola and Archimedes.



The sound holes are cut with a small, fine saw and finished with a razor sharp, fine-pointed knife.



The shape of the bass bar—a length of spruce cut with the grain running parallel with the belly and glued to the interior of the finished plate—strongly influences the tone and timbre of the violin.



The bridge is held in place by the violin's natural tension caused by the pull of the strings.



The sound post, bridge, fingerboard, nut, saddle, and pegs are fitted to each musician's personal tastes and the idiosyncrasies of the instrument.